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WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, AND WHAT IS ITS METHOD?

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During recent years there have been established in several American Theological Seminaries chairs of Biblical Theology as a department of study distinct from Exegesis and distinct from Systematic or Doctrinal Theology. In making this division we are following the example of Continental theologians who have long cultivated Biblical Theology as a separate branch of study. Biblical Theology is the scientific presentation, on the basis of Exegesis, of the contents of each type of Biblical teaching. It is a strictly historic science. The types of teaching with which the science deals will, in some cases, be represented by a single book; more frequently by the various writings of a single author, or the books of various authors which belong together by reason of likeness of contents or some other similarity. Different writers on Biblical Theology sometimes divide the material to be treated in different ways. Take, for example, the gospels. Ordinarily the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic gospels and the teaching as presented in the Fourth gospel are presented separately because the first three gospels so much resemble one another in form and in matter which they present, and because the Fourth differs so characteristically from them. But some would treat the teaching of Jesus as a whole, notwithstanding this distinction, while, for the purpose of exhibiting the peculiarities of each gospel, they would naturally be treated separately. Some writers treat the Pauline type of teaching in four divisions, corresponding to the natural grouping of Paul's letters. Others treat his system as a whole, making, of course, the principal doctrinal letters (Rom. Cor. and Gal.) the basis, but drawing freely from all the others also. Most writers in treating the Johannine theology would deal separately with the Apocalypse, because—even

if written by the author of the Fourth gospel — it represents a special type of literature whose peculiarities require to be separately described.

It will be seen that the method of Biblical Theology is especially adapted to exhibit the individuality of the Biblical writers. Its immediate aim is to reproduce in the clearest manner and in systematic form the ideas of the writer who is the subject of study at the time. All other interests — such as the adjustment of the given writer's views to those of others, or the general result of Biblical teaching as a whole — are held in check for the immediate purpose of the study. Only after each type has been exhaustively studied by itself can the work of comparison be thoroughly done; only then can the general result be fully and fairly presented.

Biblical Theology is inseparable from Exegesis. It is simply the systematized result of Exegesis. In Exegesis we take the books one by one and study them critically from beginning to end, tracing the writer's thoughts in the order of their development in that particular book. Biblical Theology avails itself of the results of Exegesis, and asks, What does the Biblical writer in question teach concerning God, concerning sin, and the like? The exhibition of the given writer's teaching as a whole upon such themes as these constitutes the Biblical Theology of that author. Exegesis stops short of its goal if it does not end in Biblical Theology. Exegetical study which is not carried to its true culmination in Biblical Theology is likely to leave the mind of the student embarrassed by the details which are inseparable from its method, without conducting him to any clear and definite doctrinal results. A topical presentation of the results of Exegesis is of the greatest importance in enabling the student to appreciate the practical value of close, critical study. Thus the reason becomes evident why in the German universities the Professors who lecture on Biblical Theology lecture also on Exegesis. The two departments, although regarded as distinct, are kept in the closest relation.

It is sometimes asked: Is not Doctrinal Theology Biblical? Does it not, at least, aim to be? And if it is, what need is there for a

distinct department of Biblical Theology? If we grant that Systematic Theology *is* Biblical (a point which I have no occasion here to discuss), there is still a useful place for Biblical Theology in theological education, on account of its peculiar aim and method. The doctrinal theologian must treat the various themes of theology in a philosophical method and spirit. His aim is to justify them to reason, to defend them against objections, and to incorporate them into a system—a rational construction of doctrines. He seeks to present under modern scientific forms of thought and for practical teaching purposes, the content of Biblical doctrine. There is necessarily a large apologetic element in Systematic Theology, and, as it has commonly been pursued—and, I believe, properly—a large metaphysical and speculative element. Biblical Theology, on the other hand, distinctly disclaims any philosophical or speculative method. The Biblical theologian places himself, for the time, in the age and circumstances of the writer with whom he is dealing. He asks simply what this writer says and means, not how that can be justified to reason, defended against objection, harmonized with the teachings of other writers or translated into the equivalents of modern thought and made part of a general scheme of doctrine. He abjures all such questions. He tries to see with the writer's eyes and to think his thoughts after him. He seeks to apprehend the form and matter of the writer's thought according to the manner of its time; to place himself at the writer's standpoint and to read him in the light of his age and circumstances.

It will be a great gain for American theology to apprehend and apply the distinction of method which has just been noticed. We have had in the brief history of our country a vigorous and creditable development of Systematic Theology. Exegesis and Biblical Theology have been less diligently and thoroughly cultivated, or have been cultivated too much under the stress of strong dogmatic bias. Our theological systems have been fortified by the citation of "proof-texts," which have been too often employed without a careful and just estimate of their significance in their original connection, and without appreciation of the Biblical writer's standpoint, purpose or mode of thought. Bib-

lical Theology, if successfully cultivated, will operate as a check upon the extravagance of the proof-text method. It will do much to save Systematic Theology from erroneous emphasis and an unhistoric application of texts. But it would furnish its sister science with great positive aids. It would present to the doctrinal theologian the Biblical material, organized and systematized. This material it would then be his task to work over into a rational system, and to present it, in the method and spirit of modern science, in a form as symmetrical and complete as the nature of the case permits.

There exists just now a certain distrust of theological systems. The temper of the age offers a great opportunity to Biblical Theology. The critical spirit holds sway. Men are eager for the results of criticism, thoroughly wrought out. The demand of the time—so far as theology is concerned—is for a thorough and impartial investigation of Biblical teaching in its genetic development and its various forms. And this work is what Systematic Theology needs in the interest of her own best work and progress. Biblical Theology, if developed in a critical and scientific spirit, and at the same time with a reverent appreciation of Biblical truth, will be one of the greatest aids to Doctrinal Theology and will inevitably have the effect to arouse interest in it. I cannot believe that interest in Doctrinal Theology will long remain second to that which is felt in any other branch of sacred learning. It is grounded in the impulse to think—to construe religious truth in systematic form and to justify it to reason. No scientific age will long abandon the pursuit of Systematic Theology. If Biblical Theology will do its work thoroughly and do it now—just when it is wanted, just when it is needed—it will give a new impetus to the study of Christian doctrine and thus, both directly and indirectly, perform a lasting service in the promotion of Christian truth.